

Northern New England Journey

A Sense of the Sea

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New Hampshire

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Around About Ports



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Take stock of your surroundings in this port town

By Archer Mayor
Photographs by John Snyder



What do puddle docks, strawberry bankes, Paul Revere, *Hawaii Five-0*, and nuclear submarines all have in common? Portsmouth, New Hampshire, of course.

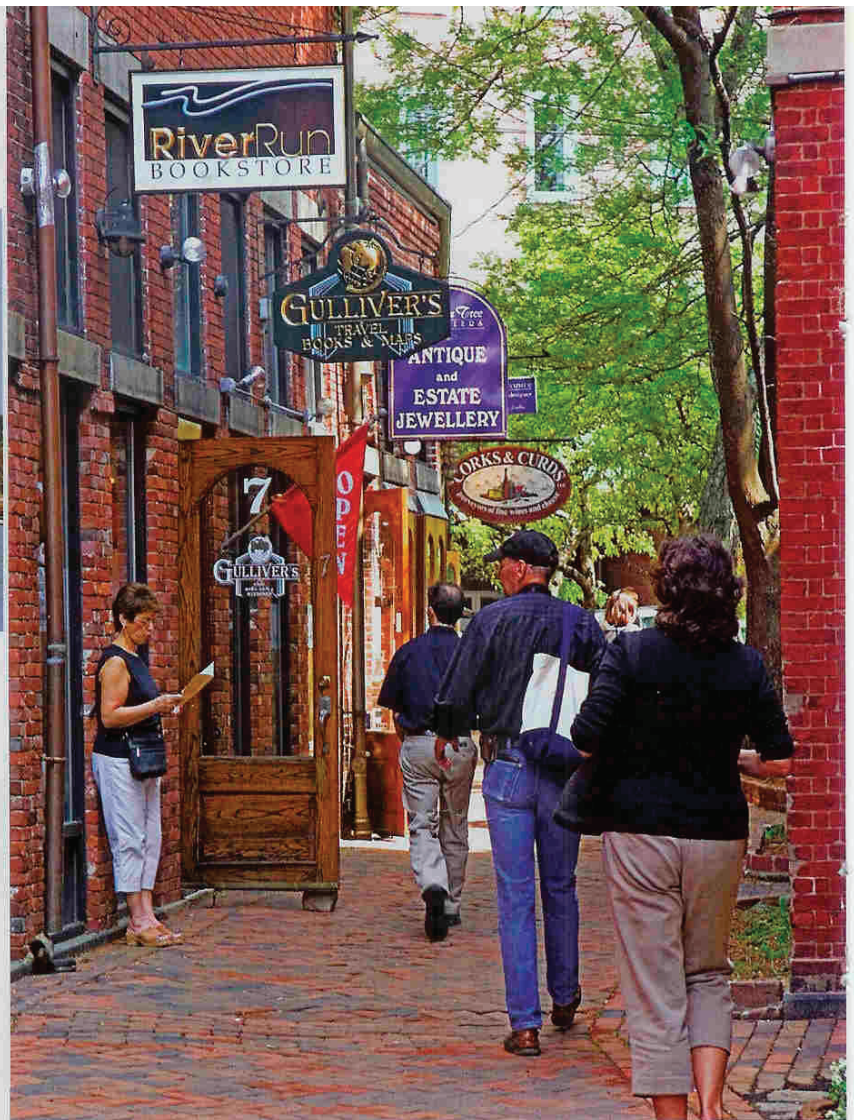
It is an ancient, bustling, vibrant port town, with twisty, narrow streets at its center, famous shopping outlets at its edges, water all around, and enough history to satisfy even the most ardent buffs. It is home to artists, boatbuilders, fishermen, booklovers, lobstermen, and yacht owners, while remaining a magnet for tourists and—every four years—politicians seeking recognition. It seems that if you were anyone of substance from the late 17th century onward—infamous and famous alike—sooner or later, you at least traveled through Portsmouth.



The town is arguably older than nearby Boston, while being more easily accessible, and bursting with commerce, the arts, fine food, eye-catching attractions, and a sense of the sea. To get a feel for New England's roots, and much of what it has experienced through subsequent centuries, it is fitting to visit a place founded just a few years after Plymouth, Massachusetts, but which is still alive and kicking, *and* considered the go-to place by many a local New Englander.

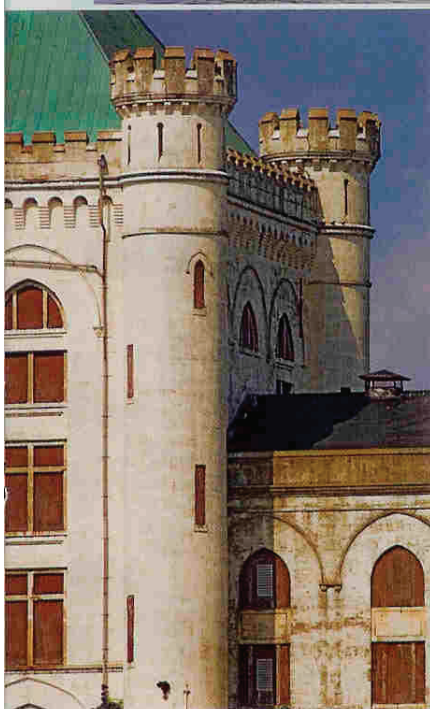
Daniel Webster practiced law here, John Paul Jones hung around long enough for his ship, the *Ranger*, to be built nearby, and George Washington also visited (presumably spending the night). Paul Revere rode up from Boston to urge the stealing of about 100 kegs of gunpowder from Fort William and Mary (now Fort Constitution). Portsmouth was the launching pad for modest dreams of empire: Benning Wentworth, erstwhile royal governor of New Hampshire in the mid-1700s, whose sprawling mansion remains a Portsmouth tourist site (the Wentworth-Coolidge Mansion), was influential enough (some might argue rapacious enough) to acquire land and push his royal province's boundaries all the way to suitably named Bennington, Vermont, before that state came into being.

Followers of current events will know the city for its proximity to the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. It is not only this country's most renowned builder (and now repairer) of submarines, but it is also famous for periodically facing closure at the hands of a selectively cost-cutting Congress. Created in 1800, it is believed to be the oldest continuously operating shipyard in U.S. history (its island real estate actually belongs to Kittery, Maine). Currently, it is not open to the public, so it is best viewed from the waters of the Piscataqua River, as part of the Portsmouth Harbor Cruises, which start out from the Ceres Street Dock.



Employing a small, sturdy boat named *Heritage*, Portsmouth Harbor Cruises takes passengers on narrated tours, including a 75-minute tour of the harbor, down river, around New Castle Island, and back, neatly capturing the area from the perspective that gave it birth—the sea. Sailing past mansions old and new (including Wentworth's), fleets of fishing vessels moored at working docks, and wartime remnants from Revolutionary-era forts to World War II bunkers, this tour is both encompassing and a visual delight.

Among the tour's many highlights are a view of Wentworth by the Sea (now a luxury resort), where Russian and Japanese



LANDMARKS: Clockwise, from left: The Piscataqua River flows past the 18th-century Wentworth-Coolidge Mansion; author Archer Mayor explores Commercial Alley's bookshops; lobstermen pass Whaleback Light at Portsmouth Harbor; fire-resistant brickwork has characterized town buildings since the early 1880s; the 1905 Portsmouth Naval Prison, called "The Castle," operated from 1908 to 1974 (it is shown up close and at its Seavey Island, Maine, location). Below right, a gazebo sits near the river. On the first two pages, Portsmouth's working waterfront, shops, restaurants, and condominiums line the Piscataqua River.

says it all. TV enthusiasts will remember *Hawaii Five-O*'s Steve McGarrett barking to Danno to both "Book 'im" and "Take him to Portsmouth," whenever the miscreant wore a Navy uniform. (A popular story has it that it was as a guard delivering a prisoner to "The Castle" during World War I that Humphrey Bogart received that distinctive scar to his lip, when his charge attempted an escape by lashing out.)

Finally, back on land and not to be missed, is the Strawberry Banke Museum, a 10-acre site of reclaimed land (previously called Puddle Dock for good and soggy reason) hosting more than 40 buildings, which, unlike the more tightly focused Williamsburg and

delegates stayed during final negotiations for the signing of the 1905 Treaty of Portsmouth. The treaty, signed at the shipyard, ended the Russo-Japanese War and won the treaty mediator, President Teddy Roosevelt, the 1906 Nobel Peace Prize.

Plimoth Plantation, are displayed so that visitors can savor what life was like not just during Colonial times but throughout the centuries following. Why is it called Strawberry Banke, you might ask. Because that was Portsmouth's original name for 23 years, in homage to the location's plethora of wild berries.

All this well-earned history notwithstanding, Portsmouth, especially when combined with the simple joys of strolling the city's streets, enjoying its many galleries, stores, and restaurants, is less about prisons and Revolutionary tumult, and more about how well it captures the promise and vitality of a region that is so famously now known as New England. 🍁

Visible across the water, on shipyard property, is the equally imposing, if utterly desolate, abandoned Portsmouth Naval Prison. Used from 1908 to 1973, and nicknamed "The Castle," it is said to have been modeled after Alcatraz, which just about

Archer Mayor is the writer of the award-winning, *New England*-based Joe Gunther series of mystery books, the 18th of which, *CHAT*, will be published in October 2007.

Ready? Set. Go!

Portsmouth Harbor Cruises runs several kinds of tours during spring, summer, and fall; rates average \$15. Call (800) 776-0915 or (603) 436-8084; visit www.portsmouthharbor.com. Strawberry Banke Museum, at 14 Hancock Street, is open year-round. Call (603) 433-1100; www.strawberrybanke.org. For more information about Portsmouth, visit www.portsmouthnh.com.

Don't Miss: North Church on Market Square and the waterfront Prescott Park, just down the street from Strawberry Banke Museum, and all the architectural gems freely scattered in between. Also, the Albacore Submarine Museum on Market Street; Hampton Beach, south of Portsmouth; the famous nine Isles of Shoals, 10 miles offshore and reachable by a choice of excursion boat services; and, for shoppers, the Kittery Outlets along Route 1, including the famous Kittery Trading Post, three miles north, in Maine.

